

Encouraging Independence

helping your
child learn

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“Let me do it myself!”

That’s the two-year-old who is determined to help by carrying eggs from the refrigerator. Or the three-year-old who wants to pour the cereal – and the milk, of course – into the bowl.

Parents who constantly say ‘no’ and ‘don’t’ will save the price of some broken eggs and spilled milk. But the real cost can be to discourage their child from becoming an independent human being.

A better response would be: “Hold the egg very gently with both hands – then bring it carefully to me,” or “If you hold the cereal box tightly, and pour it slowly, you can fill your bowl.”

Children learn best by doing . . . and from infancy to adulthood they continually attempt to master new skills. For instance, babies reach for spoons to try to feed themselves. Young children love to handle paint-brushes and create bold works of art for display on walls and doors. Teenagers learn to handle a variety of social situations.

Independence and Competence

Let us consider two kinds of independence and competence.

- A child’s ability to get along with little physical assistance from adults; for example, the ability to eat or get dressed without help.
- A child’s ability to think and decide with little guidance from adults; for example, to decide what toy to play with, to settle a dispute or to accept a challenge.

Parents want their children to become responsible, independent adults who can make decisions about their lives, who can face change with flexibility and meet challenge with courage. But parents often unintentionally limit their children’s efforts to become independent because of inconvenience, fear of danger, or a wish that they wouldn’t grow up so quickly.

How do Children Feel about Freedom?

In a child’s progress towards competence and independence, there are two important points.

Some parents feel a sense of power in being able to give or do things for their children. Children enjoy having things done for them. And they may learn that acting in an incapable or helpless manner will bring

attention and assistance. As long as parents do for their children, their children have fewer opportunities to do for themselves.

Children also enjoy being capable. They are naturally inclined to learn to do things for themselves and for others – to become competent. They may become discouraged if their parents smother them with over-protection.

Some children may assume that they are inadequate and may not try to explore their own strengths. They may become dependent and clinging; they may become defensive and rebellious, always expecting criticism.

What Can Parents Do?

Compare the following suggestions with your own thoughts on child-rearing.

Do only for children what they can't do for themselves

It's difficult to leave children alone to explore, and to avoid correcting what they do. But children reach stages where they are capable and their attempts to accomplish goals should be encouraged. For example, on that great day when baby reaches for a spoon, hand it over. There's sure to be a mess, but babies are, after all, washable.

Set priorities

Decide which is more important: a messy toybox, or a child who puts away the toys; a tidy home, or a child who is free to explore and experiment with a minimum of restriction.

It may be that you should relax your standards. When it's necessary to stop an activity, don't just say "no!" Try to redirect your child. For example, if your child is scribbling on the wall, provide a large scratch pad. Explain that the proper place to draw such pretty pictures is on paper, not on walls and doors. Your child will still experience a sense of accomplishment and learn about restrictions at the same time.

If you have a very young child, 'childproof' your home. Place valuables and dangerous objects out of reach.

Make time for training

Take time to teach your child when you're not in a hurry, or you may spend hours just correcting mistakes.

Give your child opportunities to learn by doing

Let your child know you trust him or her to try things out. Say, for example: "I've put out your jacket, so you can dress yourself," or, "Maybe you could phone your friends and ask them to your party."

The sweet sounds of praise

It's important to praise accomplishments at all age levels. When children have learned to count, to fingerpaint or to build a simple structure with blocks, they want to know their parents are proud. Admire such efforts.

Listen to how your child feels about things. There will be triumphs, and discouragements. Be responsive and tell your child that you understand that growing up and learning are difficult at times.

Never let children think of themselves as failures. Separate deeds from the doers. For example say, "Too bad *it didn't work* this time." Listen to feelings rather than always trying to come up with an alternative. Children are learning as they are doing and can often sort out what went wrong themselves.

Within limits, encourage risk-taking

A young child must be watched but this can be done without your presence being obvious. Don't hover around unless there is a real danger. When your child must be protected, try not to overdo it. An encircling arm will protect your child from a fall but won't restrict movement.

Learn to distinguish between encouraging independence and expecting too much

There's a difference between pushing children to meet your demands, and having confidence in their abilities. Children may be able to put on clothes, but not be ready to complete the job with those tricky buttons and zippers.

Try not to underestimate the level of your child's development. Watch for cues and you'll know when your child is ready to try something new.

In Conclusion

Young children need to be constantly reassured that their parents love them. When children know they are loved, they will develop good feelings and self-confidence. With a good self-image, they'll be willing to try new things and to learn to think for themselves.

Love is the greatest gift you can give your child.

You can show your love by:

- Saying "I love you".
- Kissing, hugging and touching.
- Talking or playing together.
- Going places, doing things together.
- Showing an interest in your child's activities.
- Listening carefully.
- Doing something special.
- Giving each child some individual time.

The development of a good self-image is encouraged if you:

- Recognize your child as an individual with wants and needs.
- Encourage individual thinking. Whenever possible, encourage your child's own interests and don't compare efforts and accomplishments with another child's.
- Allow the making of simple choices at an early age.
- Respect your child's views and show understanding and fairness when differences occur.
- Encourage your child to solve problems by thinking out solutions. You can support with suggestions if asked for help.
- Teach independence. Give more responsibility as your child grows older and can handle it.
- Set examples. The ways you handle relationships and situations are powerful teachers.
- Work out problems together. Allow your child to participate in decision-making whenever possible.

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